

National Family Caregiver Support Program Resources

Resolving Conflicts Related to Family Caregiving



Introduction

As most families know “Conflict Happens.” Families involved with making decisions about the care of an adult family member know how stressful conflict can be for the care provider, care receiver and other family members. Conflict is not always a bad thing. However, those unprepared for conflict are not typically able to resolve it in a positive way. This fact sheet provides an overview of areas of potential conflict that arise in family caregiving and includes tips for resolving conflict when it occurs.

Areas Of Potential Conflict

The easiest way to avoid caregiving conflict is for a potential care receiver to plan in advance for the following issues. However, not everyone is able to make their wishes known or to plan for services. Caregiving conflict can arise around a wide range of issues, including, but not limited to:

Healthcare decisions:

- Who should provide care?
- What care is needed?
- Who should make medical decisions?

Financial decisions:

- How should money be spent?
- How should investments be handled?
- How will concerns over “unwise spending,” etc. be handled?

Living arrangements:

- Where?
- With whom?
- Who decides?
- How much independence/supervision is needed?

Communication Issues:

- What information is needed or missing?
- Who has legal authority to access information? How will information be shared with those who need it?

Family relationship issues (New or long-standing):

- How should the family deal with sibling rivalries, new spouse or companion, death of a spouse/caregiver, other changes in relationships?

Decision-making:

- Who should have authority to make decisions?
- What input (if any) should others have?
- How can decision makers obtain input from the care receiver?

Household care and maintenance:

- What options are available for ongoing services?
- What services are needed and how frequently?

Safety/risk taking/autonomy:

- What safety issues are identified?
- Is the level of risk understood and acceptable?
- Should autonomy be limited?

Respite care and support for caregivers:

- What services are needed to support the caregiver?
- What services are available locally?
- What resources are available or can be used to pay for needed services?

Needs of other family members/caregivers:

- Are there competing needs of other care receivers such as dependent children or grandchildren?



Resolving Conflict

Sometimes it is hard to see another person's point of view, particularly in family situations where strong emotions are at play. The following tips can help address conflict in a positive way and stop it from escalating:

Plan a time to talk things over and set an agenda

- Focus agenda on the issues that are causing conflict.
- Keep the agenda focused. Don't discuss too much in one meeting.
- Set additional meetings for other issues if necessary.

Practice good communication skills

- Clearly say what is important to you and why you feel that way. Use "I" statements to explain how you feel and why.
- Speak for yourself and let others raise issues of importance to them.
- Separate the people from the problem. Look at the problem objectively and try to avoid assigning blame.
- Focus on interests (WHY someone feels, believes or wants a certain thing) rather than positions (WHAT someone feels, believes or wants).
- Focus on how things might work in the future. Don't dwell on past problems.
- Try to respond to one another in a way that is not defensive and hostile. (This can be hard!)

Practice "active listening" techniques

- Let everyone speak without interruption.
- Listen to what they are saying is important to them.
- Repeat back what you thought was said to be sure you understand how others are feeling.

Try role reversal

- Ask family members to pretend they are another family member who has the opposite view. Then ask them what their interests are and why they feel as they do.

Involve the care receiver

- Try to involve and respect the wishes of the care receiver in caregiving conflicts as much as possible.
- If the care receiver cannot tell you what they want or is making unsafe choices, look to that person's life long values and beliefs for guidance rather than deciding what you think would be best.

Gather needed information

- Is more information or resources needed to make a decision?
- Figure out where and how to get the information.
- Who will get it and how will it be shared?
- Schedule an additional "meeting" if necessary, after everyone has reviewed the new information.

Involve A Mediator

When families are unable to resolve caregiving problems on their own, it may be useful to involve a trained, neutral third party such as a mediator. A mediator can provide a confidential, private setting in which everyone's concerns can be heard and addressed. Mediators use a process that is fair and unbiased, and allow the participants to make decisions about the outcome.

Information provided in this fact sheet was adapted from materials submitted by The Center for Social Gerontology, Ann Arbor, MI. For more information, visit their website at www.tcs.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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